Mass Media
Visual Literacy

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Contents

Volume 46 Number 2

Mass Media Visual Literacy

4

THE SEDUCTIVE GAZE:
Television Ads and
Creative Resistance
Robert Dalton and Bill Zuk

12

COMIC EXPRESS:
A Method For Creating
Illustrated Stories
Don Bergland

18

FOR MONA LISA:
Visual Culture, Cognition
And Electronic
Learning Experiences
Don Krug

26

**PIONEERING THE
ELECTRONIC ARTS:**
Bill Zuk and Robert Dalton

34

CULTURE JAM:
A Review
Bill Zuk and Robert Dalton

36

THE KATZ MEOW:
Steve Tod

38

ARTWORKS 2005:
British Columbia Art Teachers'
Association Annual Conference
February 24-26, 2005

32

ARTIST TRADING CARDS:
Art You Won't Lose
Your Shirt Over
Sarah Petrescu

13

22

36

32

27

COMIC EXPRESS:

A METHOD FOR CREATING ILLUSTRATED STORIES

Illustrated stories are a powerful form of popular expression. Formats such as the single cartoon, panel strip, comic book, graphic novel, and illustrated book have been widely used in our culture to communicate and express ideas in dramatic ways.

Don Bergland — University of Victoria

Comic products are usually characterized by powerful graphic images which reveal skill in drawing and illustration. Students who attempt to create comic forms, however, are sometimes disappointed when their results lack the illustrative power associated with this format. One problem in using this form successfully in school settings may lie in the inability of students to accurately illustrate ideas within a frame. As a result, many students feel frustrated in developing comic formats because of their lack of advanced drawing skills.

It may not be necessary, however, for students to wait until they have perfected their drawing skills before they start exploring this medium of expression. If we see value in this medium, we may wish to explore methods which allow a simple and effective way to express ideas in comic form.

THE *"COMIC EXPRESS"* PRODUCTION METHOD

Comic Express is a simple "camera composition" method that allows all students to illustrate stories easily and effectively. This method employs a camera, a computer, and a graphics software program such as Adobe Photoshop. The fundamental "drawing" tool in this method is photography. Instead of "drawing" the elements in a panel, students assemble the required actors and props and then photograph them. The resulting photos are cropped and become panels in the comic sequence. Photos are brought into the graphics program, arranged in the desired sequence. Text boxes and caption balloons are added and an "artistic" effect is applied to the photos. This method focuses on scripting, storyboard development, creative direction, compositional technique, photography, and digital manipulation, rather than advanced drawing ability. The Comic Express method consists of a 7–step process:

Step 1 Script – A story is invented.
Step 2 Storyboard – The story is sectioned into panels in a rough storyboard.
Step 3 Actors & Props – Student actors and necessary props are assembled
Step 4 Photography – Actors and props are photographed in colour.
Step 5 Assembly – The photos are brought into a graphics program and arranged.
Step 6 Text/Captions – Speech – balloons and text are added.
Step 7 Photo Effects – Effects are added to the photos to provide an illustrated appearance.

This method can be used to create single panels, multiple panels, entire comic books, or graphic novels. To demonstrate this method, we will design a 2–panel sequence below.

Equipment

The following equipment will be required for this project:

- camera (film or digital)
- computer
- graphics software (Adobe Photoshop or Photoshop Elements)

Step 1 – Script

A story is first invented. In this example, it is a very simple story:

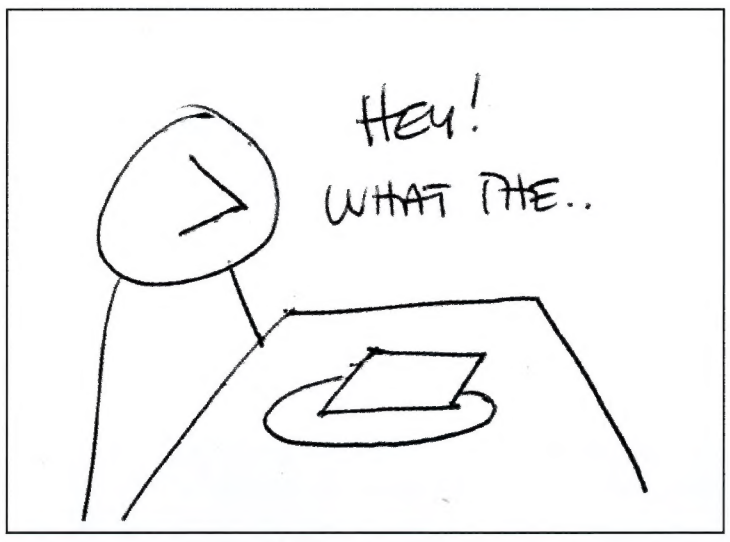
	TEXT	VISUALS
PANEL 1	Hey! What the…!	A man is sitting at a table. He is looking at a sandwich he has just been served.
PANEL 2	This sandwich has no top-slice!"	He holds up the sandwich and complains to the waiter.

- A man at a restaurant is served a sandwich with no topslice.
- He complains.

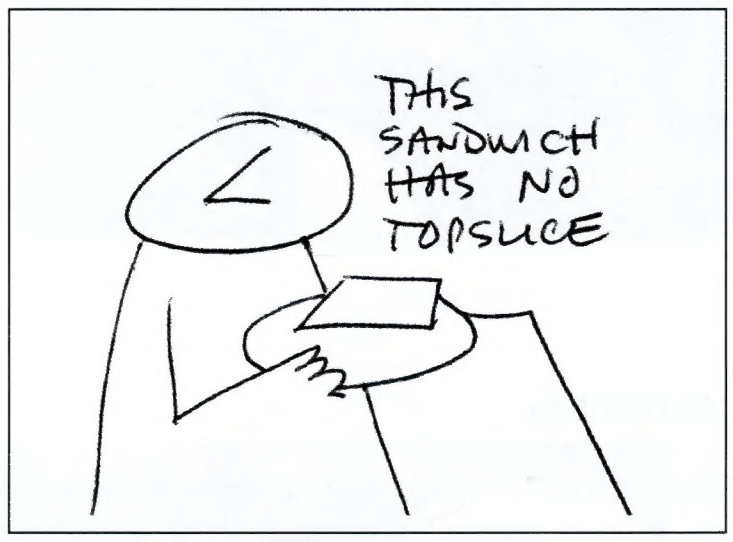
The story is divided up into a sequence of panels. The script should include the actual text to be used as well as a description of the visual space:

Step 2 – Storyboard

This script is roughly storyboarded to give a sense of the visual elements and their placement. Students can explore a variety of angles, shots, and compositions without worrying about a "finished" appearance.



Panel 1 –A sandwich with no top-slice



Panel 2 –He loudly complains

Step 3 – Actors & Props

The script and storyboard are examined and a list of required actors and props is created. This particular story requires the following:

- One actor (man)
- A table setting
- A sandwich with no topslice

The actor and the props are prepared. A setting is created. These are assembled and then arranged in the required way.

Step 4 – Photography

Once the actors and props are set up, they are photographed. Students can use either a film or a digital camera for this process. Two photographs are required for this particular story.

After the photographs are taken, they are processed. Digital photos are instantly available simply by downloading to the

computer. If a traditional film camera is used, the photos will best be processed as digital images on a CD–ROM. If regular prints are obtained, they will have to be scanned and converted to digital images.

Photo 1 –The actor looking at his sandwich order.

Students "draw" the image through the camera." They can be very flexible and creative in the photography stage. Different camera angles, and actor positions can be explored.

Photo 2 –The actor holding up the plate and complaining.

Again, students can both pose the actor and position the camera in a number of different ways. A large number of photographs can be taken and the best one selected later.

Step 5. – Assembly

After the photographs are processed as digital images (jpegs), they are brought into a graphics program. The best software program for this kind of work is Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Photoshop Elements. A new digital file is created in Photoshop and the photos are imported into it. They are then sized and arranged in a side–by–side sequence:

Photo 1 *Photo 2*

Step 6 – Text/Captions

The sequence is examined with reference to the script and storyboard. White balloons are created in Photoshop. These can be traditional speech balloons or text panels. Text is then placed over the balloons. This provides a good opportunity for exploring a variety of fonts and how they contribute to the power of the message.

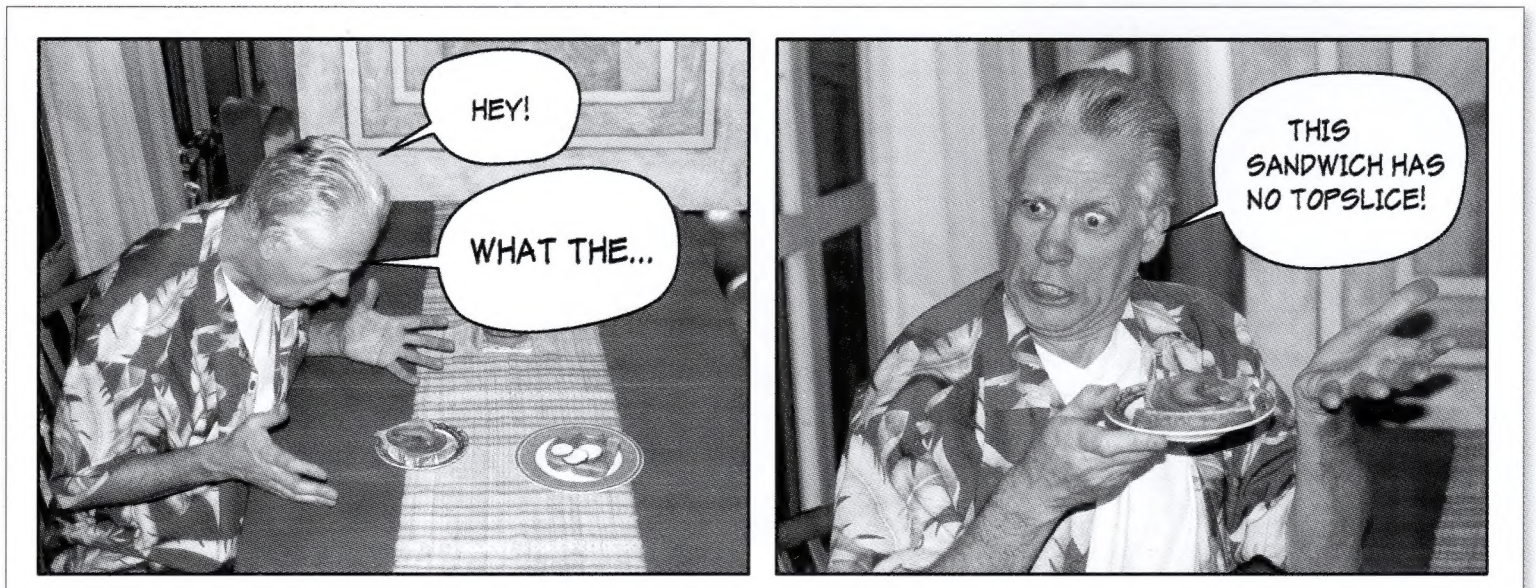


Photo 1 *Photo 2*

The illustrated story is now starting to take shape. The process could end here. At this point, we have what is called a photo vignette. The story has been told in a simple graphic format (photographic) and contains text elements.

Step 7 – Photo Effects

Students may want to progress to the next stage which involves altering the photographic look of the images. Various effects can be applied to the photos to give them more of an illustrated feel.

Effect #1 –Poster Edges

Students can explore Filters in Photoshop and develop a personal style based on the use of one or more of these. In the example above, the Filter called Poster Edges was used. Many other effects and filters can be employed in this method.

Effect #2 – Threshold

In the example above, the Photoshop Image Adjustment Tool "Threshold" was used to provide a dynamic black and white effect.

Adobe Photoshop and Photoshop Elements offer a wide range of Filters and Effects. The types of style experimentation which can occur are limitless. Young producers may want to explore a variety of styles and develop one that is uniquely their own. Teachers may want to assign the invention of an original effect recipe as part of the learning and production process.

USING THE METHOD

The Comic Express method can be practiced and learned in a progression of increasingly difficult tasks. Students can start with simple 3– and 4–panel stories. Pre–created short stories can be provided allowing students to develop the ability to script, storyboard, and illustrate ideas. When skills increase, more elaborate stories involving multiple panels and pages can be attempted. Once the method has been learned and practiced, a variety of project ideas can be formulated. Students may want to work in teams and develop serial stories, characters, and dramatic situations, Students should be encouraged to examine existing comic resources to discover the techniques used by professionals such as different–sized panels, unusual angles, close–ups, and varying fonts and sizes. The method could also be employed in projects such as illustrated storybooks and even graphic novels. As students gain more skill in using Photoshop, they will be able to manipulate the actual photos in more creative ways.

Comic Express is a simple and effective way of communicating ideas in a visual way. It is a good tool for introducing the value of producing sequenced images which can easily evolve into more complex systems for expression. Employing this particular method means that all students have an equal opportunity to explore the benefits of working with sequential illustrated images without the inhibitions brought on by limited drawing experience.

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